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# ABSOLUTE VALUES: PROBLEM OF THE ULTIMATE FRAME OF REFERENCE

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In approaching the seemingly endless complexities of human values, I find, for my own thinking at least, that it helps to avoid blind alleys and much ineffective spinning of wheels if I can keep my thought relevant to some active current controversy or to recognized traditional value conflicts.

If we look at any value controversy like that, for example, currently going between the 'abortionists' on the one side and the so-called 'right-to-life' advocates on the other, I think a basic and important principle becomes apparent: namely, that values in general, by nature, are not absolute but always relative to some context or frame of reference, involving often some implicitly accepted aim or intent. Both the abortionists and the 'right-to-lifers' (or opponents in any value conflict) advance arguments that will be found as a rule, I think, to appear sound and make sense logically, provided that one is willing to accept the particular starting frame of reference used in each case; that is, the starting axioms, premises, and related facts and implications on which the reasoning rests, and which may be explicit but more often are largely implicit.

Axiology shows that values and value priorities change, and may even undergo a diametric reversal, with changes in the general frame of reference. To use an example that is becoming familiar, what may seem the right and most humane thing to do in terms of immediate, present generation standards may become obviously wrong and most inhumane when judged in terms of the effects on coming generations; that is, when viewed in a long-term or 'future generation' framework. This first point, namely, that the frame of reference is critical for determining values and value judgments, is something that I hope you will be willing to accept as a general background principle for what follows.

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Accepting that societal values, especially of the kind we disagree on, are dependent upon, and relative to, some general frame of reference, we can then turn to the question "What makes one reference frame superior or supersedant to another?" With possible criteria in mind I would like to jump directly to our title question: "Is there some ultimate frame of reference for values that could logically and rightly be accepted and respected by all countries, cultures, governments and creeds, by mankind in general, as the final supreme standard when it comes to judging ethical priorities, resolving value conflicts and as a guideline for human judgment generally and international decision making in particular?" The practical need for some such unifying global standard becomes more and more evident for things such as world population control, conserving world resources, protecting the oceans and for various other modern world problems that increasingly require united effort on a global scale.

I am going to anticipate a little here, and say that, along with some others, I have argued elsewhere and will continue to support here, the conclusion that just such a unifying ultimate frame of reference for social values can be envisaged—founded in the revelations of science. In other words founded in a reference framework based in the scientific method as the best avenue to truth available to the human brain and also in the worldview that derives from science, i.e., the world picture, supported by the total collective knowledge of all the sciences along with the insights and perspectives this knowledge brings. I would be willing to include here also any empirical knowledge that is equally reliable to that garnered by the scientific method as, for example, certain historical facts.

A number of different but convergent lines of reasoning can be seen, that all logically lead to, and support this same general conclusion, one of which I outlined last year. The one I will use today is something of a shortcut and goes as follows.

The supreme, ultimate authority, or reference, for determining what is ethically and morally good, right and true, that has been most widely and commonly recognized throughout history, has been the concept, in various forms, of man's creator, including the forces that move and control the universe. Visualized and defined in different ways to pagans, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Islams, American Indians, and so on, the essential broad concept as an ultimate authority and reference can be seen to run as a common thread through most of man's great mainline value-belief systems. There are, of course, exceptions such as Humanism, Hedonism and Com-

munism, which use lower level reference frames anchored in the human species itself rather than in some "higher authority."

Despite the predominant agreement through history with respect to the broad general concept, feelings run high, as we all know, with respect to specific differences in the way the forces of creation and cosmic causation have been variously conceptualized and the resultant dogma, doctrines and traditions that have grown up around each. Battles have been fought over these differences and historians remind us that religious wars are the bloodiest (just as arguments heard in Committee I have been the most heated). The reason, in large part, is that the sense of higher meaning and the value of existence itself (and, therefore, of most everything else that counts) is directly at stake in reference to these ultimate parameters at the top of our value hierarchies.

In any case, the result, with which we are all too familiar, is that the world community has had to live with a series of diverse ultimate standards or measuring sticks for what is ethically right and true, with the supporters of each system devoutly claiming theirs to be *the* truth to be accepted on faith by the followers, in many cases as being absolute and beyond question. The value differences that derive from these various belief systems, as already emphasized by others in this conference, exert profound and pervasive effects on social and political decision-making that add up to what is probably one of the most, if not *the* most formidable of the divisive influences that now confront us and operate against world harmony and unity.

One does not find much hope that this situation will be remedied in the forseeable future by (a) the gradual dominance of one or another of the currently existent value-belief systems at the expense of the others; nor, either through (b) the appearance and rise of any new alternatives based in the teachings, visions and revelations of any single individual inspired leader. One suspects the world has become too sophisticated, too diverse and complex to be united by such a development. Nor does (c) the Communist framework appear to provide the kind of answer that is needed here, with its relatively narrow perspectives based in class power struggles of industrialized human society. Current world problems demand higher perspectives and a frame of reference that includes the long term welfare of the entire ecosystem.

An alternative possible solution for which one can perhaps see some hope consists essentially in (d) applying the interpretations, insights, revela-

tions and truths of science to those ultimate worldview, 'role of life' concepts that set the parameters for determining higher meaning and which in turn hierarchically determine subsidiary values. It does not seem entirely hopeless or unreasonable that the different peoples, governments and faiths of the world might agree to unite in bringing their respective divergences into accord with the facts and cosmic scheme supported by science as the ultimate criteria and reference frame for determining ethical guidelines, at least for international and global problems. This is not with the idea that scientific truth is absolute and infallible, but only with the strong conviction that it does represent the best and most reliable, credible and dependable *approach to truth* available.

The desirability of trying to obtain uniform agreement on some explicit frame of reference in these matters is evident in theory as well as practice. Along with other innate or biological origins of human values we recognize a basic inherent tendency of the human brain to seek meaning, including meaning in the long term. This is coupled with an innate reasoning faculty and the combination leads to a rational cognitive upper structure in the value systems of man. It is within this cognitive, rational realm, which is distinctly human, that the major ideological, political and religious differences are found. When it comes to ordering social priorities in this realm the kind of ultimate rational reference frame that is used becomes critical.

The kinds of changes that would be required to bring the diverse contemporary creeds into accord with a reference frame based in science would be mainly corrective rather than exclusive and could be accomplished largely in each case by updating and reinterpreting aspects of doctrine that have remained fixed for decades or even centuries while science has been advancing. In the eyes of modern science, to put it simply, man's creator becomes the vast interdependent and interwoven matrix of all evolving nature, a tremendously complex concept that includes all of the immutable and emergent cosmic forces that control everything from high energy subnuclear particles on up to galaxies, not forgetting the causal properties and powers of brains, and of living and behaving organisms generally at the individual and at social levels—on all of which science has gradually become our recognized prime authority and teaches more with each new discovery.

To accept the foregoing as an ultimate frame of reference would imply that what is good, right or to be valued ethically becomes defined, very broadly, as that which is in harmony and accord with, sustains, or enhances

the orderly design of evolving nature. Conversely, that which is discordant, degrades or destroys nature's overall plan is bad and wrong. The reference is not to the innumerable subsystems within subsystems of the natural order but to the overall "grand orderly design" in long term perspective with the focus on evolution in our own biosphere.

Skipping the intermediate logic one can foresee, at least in general outline, some of the kinds of value changes that would logically emerge on the above terms. These can be inferred to include directly an increased respect and reverence for all nature and for what is sometimes referred to as the "infinite wisdom of nature." The quality, balance, and progressive differentiation of the ecosystem as a whole would acquire heightened priority. Things like the recycle philosophy, species' rights, resource conservation, and control of population explosions become reinforced with a new kind of dedicated commitment beyond that of mere human expedience.

Man, as part of evolving nature at the peak of the evolutionary scale, remains the prime concern but stands to lose some of the prior uniqueness and 'measure-of-all-things' status accorded in some previous systems. In cases of conflict particularly, where human ideas of what is best obviously run counter to the time-tested principles and proven plan of nature, greater deference is given to the latter. A sense of higher meaning is preserved with a meaningful relation to something more important than the human species taken by itself.

It is to be expected that one may find at first glance many apparent difficulties and contradictions in attempts to use the principles and embodied wisdom of the evolving natural order as an ultimate reference frame for ethical guidelines. Difficulties and contradictions, however, are encountered in applying any ethical system. Christian doctrine is full of moral contradictions. The hope is not to eliminate all controversy and debate but only to bring these and the resultant decisions within a given logical domain determined by the indicated frame of reference.

From the personal standpoint it may be noted that a change as described in the *ultimate* frame of reference would neither eliminate nor much alter the great bulk of values throughout lower levels of the meaning hierarchy. The biologically based, personal, family, social, national and international, day-to-day and year-to-year interactions and relationships, with their meaning and value, remain operative and undergo little change by being brought into line with the ultimate reference frame described. For most human evaluation processes the ultimate reference can be, and commonly is,

forgotten with only periodic checkups to keep the prevailing perspectives in line and actions on the right path.

Finally, in view of the overwhelming complexity of the forces of creation and cosmic causation as revealed by science, plus the natural innate tendency of the human brain to personify hidden causation and also leadership, it becomes reasonable at times and often more convenient for thinking and communication to personify the concept of the ultimate reference. The proviso must be made, of course, that any such personification should be remembered for what it is and not taken so literally that it leads to false inferences regarding the nature and properties of the ultimate reference.